

Book Review

Approaches to Islamization

The Islamization of Science: Four Muslim Positions Developing an Islamic Modernity by Leif Stenberg. Lund: Lund Studies in History of Religion, Lund University, 1996. ISBN 91-22-01723-2. Pp. 364.

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The Muslim world has responded to the crisis in the Muslim mind in several ways. Some tried to show the congruity between the essential sources and teachings of Islam and the Western science. Others have attempted a total civilizational transformation by jettisoning the Islamic principles in favour of Westernization/modernization. However, a new attempt at intellectual transformation is in progress in the Muslim World known widely as the movement for the "Islamization of Knowledge." Leif Stenberg tries to capture the different strands of this trend. He, however, narrows down the concept of "knowledge" to mean "Scientific Knowledge" and analyses the "discourse" on the Islamic Science among four Muslim intellectual elite.

The "discourse" evidently is religious and hence requires an understanding of religion. Stenberg views religion as a part of society and culture. He theorizes that "people's religious realities are socially constructed within the limits set by the natural environment and biology" (p.17). The meanings attached to religious rites and rituals are influenced by the social environment. Islam as such can neither be perceived as independent of people's personal beliefs or interpretations nor its rules and laws be derived from "normative religious sources" (p.17). These have to be analysed as social constructions, they will vary from place to place and time to time, and consequently there will be not one but "many Islams" (p.15).

Strange though it may seem, it is this secular framework which is adopted to study the values, ideas and norms of the four schools which believe in Islam being a complete, comprehensive civilization.

The justification for this approach is two-fold. One, is his “ethnocentric” bias; his refusal to share the claims Muslim ascribe to Islam, to “give the revealed word of God—the Qur’ān —its rightful position in a modern context” (p. 18). The second is the need to bring a new perspective to the understanding of Islam.

The central concept of Stenberg’s thesis is “*discourse*” and Islam is viewed as an on-going discourse “where many ‘Islams’ fight to become the One Islamic tradition” (p. 15). To map out the discursive practice concerning Islamization, Stenberg arranges the formulated statements in “positions.” Each position is centered around the ideas of an exponent. The four chosen exponents are the French physician Maurice Bucaille, the Iranian-American scholar and historian of science and philosophy Seyyed Hussein Nasr, the Pakistani-British “writer” Ziauddin Sardar, and the Palestinian-American philosopher Ismā‘īl Rājī al-Fārūqī. These individuals have been chosen, explains Stenberg, because they are important, their perspectives are widespread among Muslims, and their books are referred to as authoritative expositions on Islam. Some of these characterizations may be justified but these exponents are not comparable. Bucaille is a pure scientist, al-Fārūqī is a pure Muslim philosopher, Nasr, while having a science background has Ṣūfī leanings with interest in the history of the philosophy of religion. Ziauddin Sardar, with a degree in physics and information sciences, worked as an information consultant and wrote almost without focus. For each of these exponents, Stenberg first provides a brief bio-intellectual background followed by an introduction to the basic ideas of their positions. Then follows a discussion of several themes: malaise of science in the Western world, use of Islamic terminology and language; use of history and influential figures, and the function of religion.

The thesis begins with Sardar and his group known collectively as *Idjmālīs*. The reason perhaps is that Sardar was more accommodative to the author, easily accessible and had much in common with the author except faith. In contrast, Nasr was more formal, al-Faruqi was martyred before the thesis was begun and Bucaille declined to meet the author. Interestingly, Bucaille was the last to be discussed. Yet the picture that is portrayed of Sardar is not the one that Muslims would be delighted to read. A self-confessed “writer,” Sardar wrote on a wide variety of subjects and for ideological as well as economic reasons. His book *Muhammad for Beginners* was “an entirely commercial project” (p.48).

Sardar “is a Beatles fan...” (p. 81), and makes use of Beatles terminologies in his discourse. Thus, Seyyed Nasr is criticised, under the heading *Nowhere Man*, inspired by the Beatles. Nasr is taking us on a *Magical Mystery Tour*, and the part where Sardar summarizes Nasr’s views is called *Ground Control to Major Tom*, after the first line in David Bowie’s song *Space Oddity* (p. 269). Likewise, Abdus Salam and Ali Kettani who advocate positivistic and secular approach to science are criticised under the heading *Look at All Those Lonely People*, taken from the song *Eleanor Rigby* by Beatles. Sardar is highly critical of every other Muslim scholar or activist. Kalim Siddiqui, for instance, is labeled “as a Marxist Muslim with Trotskyite leanings” (p. 43).

Islam, for Sardar, is a comprehensive system which, *ipso facto* must have a science which can be characterized as specifically Islamic. Science, to Sardar, is not an objective phenomenon but a cultural activity. Western science and technology reflects Western ethos and values which are not in harmony with Islamic values. Sardar cautions against the use of Islamic concepts to make Western science Islamic; rather, Muslims should try to develop Islamic science on the framework of Islamic values. This is absolutely essential since science, as practiced in Europe and America, is in a crisis situation. Western sciences are particularistic, reductionist, biased and obsolete. The *Idjmālīs* use criticisms formulated by Thomas Kuhn, Paul Feyerabend, Karl Popper and Michael Faucault to support their ideas on the negative role of science. However, Stenberg points out, the *Idjmālīs* “show little interest in the actual ideas of Feyerabend and others or in the differences between their points of view” (p. 95). The *Idjmālīs* in their attempt to demonstrate the correct usage of selected Islamic terms begin by defining a term or an event which then is substantiated by referring to the works produced by other *Idjmālīs* themselves. This is further buttressed by selective quotations or sayings from historical figures, in particular al-Ghazālī and Ibn Khaldūn. Sardar is a theoretician whose task is to provide “general outlines for the formation of a specifically Islamic science” (p. 79) based on a framework of conceptualized Islamic terms, such as *tawhīd*, *‘ilm*, *‘adl* etc.

Sardar’s profile may be compared with the picture portrayed of a gentle, scholarly, Islamic personality of al-Fārūqī, an Indiana graduate, who retreated to the quarters of al-Azhar to prepare himself to serve Islam. Al-Fārūqī was disturbed by the pitiable condition of the Ummah facing the onslaughts of the West. The Ummah, to al-

Fārūqī is characterised by “a recession in thought and a lack of vision” (p. 166).

To rejuvenate the Ummah, the West has to be encountered intellectually and the Western science’s reductionism and its methodological shortcomings, exposed systematically. The existing bifurcated educational system in the Muslim world must be replaced with a system which integrates revelation and reason and imparts a holistic knowledge. The science should “serve the telic nature of the universe” and all academic disciplines should serve the purpose of Ummatism (p. 182). The Qur’ān and Sunnah should form the basis of all education and the golden age of Islam and prominent historical individuals like al-Bukhārī, al-Rāzī and Ibn Taymiyyah should be taken as role models.

To this end al-Fārūqī and IIIT initiated the Islamization of Knowledge movement, criticised colloquial Arabic and attempted to create an “Islamic English” so that the language of the Qur’ān is not distorted or misunderstood. According to Stenberg, al-Fārūqī and IIIT are appreciative of all intellectual efforts by all scholars irrespective of their affiliations. The IIIT has adopted an “open minded attitude” towards those who are critical of the Islamization of Knowledge movement. They deal with Maurice Bucaille in a positive manner and take no notice of Sardar and the *Idjmālī* position. They are critical of “mysticism” and hence of Nasr’s position. They explain that a reality, experienced esoterically, cannot be validated and it would “end in the corruption of the authentic message of God” (p. 280). However, many adherents of Nasr’s position are held in esteem.

Even though al-Fārūqī and his ideas on Islam and Islamic science is the subject of Stenberg’s thesis, al-Fārūqī is overshadowed primarily by the IIIT and its front ranking intellectuals. The chapter on al-Fārūqī contains many more references to AbdulHamid A. AbuSulayman and other stalwarts of the IIIT then to al-Faruqī. In dealing with IIIT’s position, Stenberg considers all those who published in IIIT journals or participated in IIIT sponsored conferences and seminars as espousing IIIT views. Strangely, some of the critics of IIIT appear as the protagonists of the IIIT position and followers of al-Fārūqī. Persons who worked closely with al-Fārūqī, particularly AbuSulayman, could have been used more fruitfully as resource persons.

Stenberg’s exposition of the position of Seyyed Hossein Nasr is illuminating. Nasr has advanced the notion of “Sacred Science,” and

claims to represent what he calls the Traditionalist school. Nasr is appreciative of the works of writers like Rene Guenon, Frithjof Schuon and other representatives of the Traditionalist standpoint. In Nasr's perspective, arts and sciences in Islam aim at revealing the unity and interrelatedness of all that exist. The Western science, used for domination and control, is in disarray as it is secularised and compartmentalised. It studies the quantitative aspects of things in the material world with no relation to the sacred or to metaphysics. Islamic science, in contrast, emphasize the relationship between the sacred and the profane and studies different phenomena in the world in its organic totality. With carefully crafted terms based on the traditional meanings of the words, Nasr has advocated a reconstruction of Islamic scientific thought on the basis of the revealed knowledge. He has tried to provide the philosophical foundations of a sacred science which functions within the parameters set by revealed guidance.

Stenberg, for understandable reasons, is critical in his dealings with the fourth exponent, Maurice Bucaille. Stenberg acknowledges that Bucaille is highly popular with the Muslims. He accounts for this "influential and convincing position to among others, the fact that he is a white man from France, is a medical doctor, has studied Arabic and understands science (p. 230). Bucaille considers himself a "scientist" concerned with scientific matters. He is not concerned with the guidance of the believers, a responsibility which he left for Ismā'īl al-Fārūqī to shoulder. He is critical of the West for its materialism, atheism and for the fact that the religion has been in opposition to science in the West. These characteristics threaten the status of Islam. Bucaille is uncomfortable with the poor translation and interpretation of the Qur'ān. Even though he is critical of certain ideas and problems within science, he has a strong faith in both science and Islam.

Bucaille is a convert to Islam who claims to have discovered the conformity between the Qur'anic text and the results of modern science. He claims his studies to be "objective" and deals with scientific facts. The terms "objectivity", "objective data" and "facts" are cornerstones in the theory developed by Bucaille. He claims to refrain from making value judgements on the authenticity of the narrations in the Qur'ān or the Bible unless they are accompanied by "objective data". "Nevertheless, he often treats the Biblical narrations literally, in marked contrast with his more interpretational treatment of Qur'anic passages" (p. 253).

Bucaille chastises those who understand science as the “key to everything”. He believes that the Qur’ān contains the truth which science cannot ignore. Qur’ān is a true revelation from God. It is rational, perfect, scientific, inimitable, free from myths or superstitions and the prophecies made in the Qur’ān will be fulfilled (p. 242). Stenberg, however, believes that some of Bucaille’s text can be characterised as *da‘wah* literature, some of its passages have “apologetic function,” some of its statements are sweeping, some of the references are arbitrarily done, and Bucaille, being a convert, has proved himself to be “more royalistic than the king” (p. 227).

The four exponents have many things in common. They are critical of fundamentalism (those who emphasize mechanical performance rites and rituals without understanding their meaning or purpose), and secularism as dangerous to the authentic understanding of Islam. Likewise, they distrust the *‘ulamā’*, the traditionally educated religious scholars, because of their inability to understand the modern world and solve modern problems. The four exponents converge in various meetings and conferences and, at times, venture joint projects. Yet their hatred towards each other is profound. Stenberg’s study shows the fractured nature of the community of Muslim scholars and their vulnerability to Western temptations. It should force Muslim scholars to communicate and respect each other, a characteristics sorely lacking in the Muslim Ummah.

Happiness and Well-being

Happiness, Well-being and the Meaning of Life: A Dialogue of Social Science and Religion edited by Vincent Brummer & Marcel Sarot. Kampen, The Netherlands: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1996. ISBN, 90-390 02711, 162 pp.

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A collection of nine papers, most of which were presented at the fourth (and final) consultation on science and religion held at the University of Aarhus, Denmark in December, 1992, the book under review attempts to clarify the concepts of happiness, well-being and the meaning of life. In particular, the authors explain the concept of